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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ANKARA 000125

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/26/2018
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [OSCE](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: TURKEY: MARCH LOCAL ELECTIONS - A PRIMER

REF: A. 08 ANKARA 1667
 B. ANKARA 64
 C. 08 ANKARA 2129
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 E. 08 ANKARA 1723
 F. 08 ANKARA 1831
 G. 08 ADANA 50
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Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) on March 29 will face its first nationwide electoral test since its landslide victory in the July 2007 parliamentary elections. Some 48 million voters will go to the polls to elect approximately 2,300 mayors and almost 100,000 other local officials. AKP is sparing no expense to secure victory, while opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), Nationalist Action Party (MHP), and, in the Southeast, pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP), are leading the fight to convince voters that AKP's ties to corruption and inaction on critical issues like the economy make it ill-suited to lead. With just over two months to go until elections, we highlight what's at stake in the elections, the voting timeline, how victory will be judged, and key factors and races to watch. END SUMMARY

Who Voters Are Electing

12. (U) Turkish voters head to the polls every five years for local elections, to elect the following:

-- Mayors. Voters will select 16 metropolitan municipal mayors and approximately 3,000 Turkish mayors. Turkey's largest cities and provincial capitals, like Istanbul and Ankara, are designated "metropolitan municipalities," an administrative arrangement under which a number of individual municipalities exists. Turkey's metropolitan mayors dominate politics in their cities, controlling in large measure the purse strings of the respective municipalities within the metropolitan area.

-- Provincial General Assemblies. There are 3,208 seats to be filled in Turkey's 81 provinces. In contrast to all other local election races, voters cast ballots for a party, not an individual candidate.

-- Municipal Assemblies. There are approximately 34,000 seats associated with municipal assemblies. The YSK's

decision regarding the dissolution of municipalities with fewer than 2,000 people will also affect the number of seats in this category.

-- Headmen (Muhtar) and Eldermen assemblies in villages, districts and neighborhoods. There are more than 50,000 seats for these positions to run administrative territories smaller than a municipality. No party affiliation is permitted.

Judging Victory

13. (C) Local election will serve as a vote of confidence for the AKP government. AKP Deputy Group Chair Sadullah Ergin told us January 14 that AKP views the election as crucial because they "are a referendum on AKP rule." Toning down AKP's pre-economic downturn claims of winning 50 percent of the vote, Ergin said AKP would need to win at least 40 percent of the provincial general assembly vote to be able to claim victory. Losing the mayorship of metropolitan Ankara would hurt but would not constitute a defeat, while pulling off an unexpected victory in Izmir or Diyarbakir would contribute to the perception of an AKP victory. Ergin and other AKP contacts are predicting AKP will take 40-45 percent of the vote. Exuding confidence, PM Erdogan has said repeatedly that he will resign the leadership of AKP if the party comes in second. (COMMENT: This is a safe statement; a second-place finish is highly unlikely. END COMMENT.)

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14. (C) CHP MP Mesut Deger told us that CHP would see any national result over 20 percent as a victory. "Even if it is only 21 percent, that would be a victory for us," according to Deger. He also specified that AKP could not declare victory with less than 40 percent of the vote, and argued that under such circumstances, AKP would be forced by public pressure to go to early national parliamentary elections.

Election Schedule

15. (U)

-- Jan. 1: Turkey's Supreme Election Board (YSK) releases list of parties eligible to run.

-- Jan. 1-30: Local administration leaders (Muhtars) publicly display voter registration lists.

-- Feb. 5: Voters and political parties can make objections to information in registration lists.

-- Feb. 10: Amendments to voter registration lists must be finalized.

-- Feb. 12: Voters informed where they must cast votes.

-- Feb. 17: Deadline for parties to submit candidate names for sub-provincial councils.

-- March 1: Sub-provincial election boards announce the names of mayoral candidates and provincial election boards the metropolitan municipal mayoral candidates.

-- March 19-28: Election campaign or "propaganda" period. During this time, the YSK oversees all campaign events and advertisements, in order to prevent the ruling party from exploiting its position for the benefit of its candidates. During this period, the government may not use state facilities for party purposes; the government may not participate in ground breaking ceremonies; government vehicles may not be used for campaigning purposes; and

governors may not host the PM or any ministers.

-- March 29: Election day.

Factors to Watch

16. (C)

-- Personalities: Turkish voters have historically placed great importance on the personalities of candidates in local elections. Although there is no doubt that voters will consider AKP's performance in governing Turkey, political analysts across the board agree that voters will continue to give great weight to the track records and personalities of individual candidates. This gives well-known candidates with big personalities an opportunity to best AKP candidates, who are selected through a highly organized vetting structure and then supported by the party's deep pockets.

-- Economy: AKP swept to power in 2002 largely on promises of rebuilding a troubled economy. Its success in bringing economic growth and stability engendered broad national support. Our contacts agree that the current economic crisis is the one issue with the potential to severely set back AKP at the polls. Factories are closing, 2009 exports are expected to decline by at least 20 percent, unemployment is on the rise (officially now at 10.2 percent, unofficially at least double that figure), and 2009 growth is expected to be flat at best. AKP is trying to disassociate itself from the causes leading to an ailing economy, and is scrambling to ease the burden on poor citizens through voter aid (see below).

-- AKP's Voter Aid: AKP continues to deliver large amounts of municipal aid, including distributions of free food and coal packages. In 2008 the AKP-run Ankara municipality distributed over 100,000 tons of coal, according to

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"Hurriyet." The opposition decries this as encouraging a "beggar culture." Despite AKP opponents' assertions that voters see through these tactics, the distributions have proved an effective tool in the past, and are likely again to sway some poor and rural voters.

-- Corruption: Opposition politicians, journalists, and analysts believe that the fallout of the Deniz Feneri corruption case in Germany, and several other cases linking AKP to alleged corruption, affected Turkish voters, leading to a sharp decline in AKP support throughout Fall 2008 (ref A). Opposition parties will ramp up efforts to try to tie AKP to corruption in the coming weeks.

-- AKP Efforts to Attract Liberal Voters: Liberal voters are a relatively small group but played an important role in bringing AKP to power in 2002. They have expressed dismay with AKP's stalled effort at reform and Erdogan's anti-democratic tendencies. Many contacts interpret AKP's recent launch of Kurdish language programming on state-run television as an attempt not only to gain the support of ethnic Kurdish voters in the Southeast, but also to win back liberal voters. AKP contacts believe the Ergenekon investigation (ref B) will also attract liberal voters, a questionable claim given that many liberals are turned off by perceived abuses and heavy-handed tactics associated with the investigation.

-- Claims of electoral fraud: Recent complaints of electoral shenanigans (refs C, D) raise the prospect of further challenges to come. Although international observers have not been invited to monitor the elections, parties are invited to send their own teams of observers to all polling places. Some opposition parties have already complained of disadvantage because they do not have sufficient resources or

manpower to send observers to all polling stations.

Key Races

17. (C)

-- Ankara: In an attempt to defeat AKP incumbent metropolitan municipal mayor Melih Gokcek, Turkey's main center-left parties -- CHP, the Democratic Left Party (DSP), and the Social Democrat People's Party (SHP) -- have united in support of CHP candidate and former SHP Ankara metropolitan mayor Murat Karayalcin. Karayalcin hopes to draw broad support by tapping into the widespread belief that Gokcek has enriched himself greatly in his position through illegal contracts. But he faces an uphill battle in defeating Gokcek, who has held the position since 1994, maintains strong support from Ankara's poor and middle-class voters, and is an expert in the art of injecting money into local development projects in the run-up to elections.

-- Ankara's Cankaya municipality: In order to win this secular CHP stronghold, where the presidency, prime ministry and national ministries are located, AKP has named Bulent Akarcili a moderate, centrist candidate who served as Minister of Health and later Minister of Tourism during former PM Turgut Ozal's Motherland (ANAP) government. CHP has yet to choose its candidate, having passed over its incumbent due to corruption allegations. AKP hopes that this strategy, of nominating moderate, secular candidates and providing them large campaign war chests will lead it to victory over the yet-to-be named CHP candidate. It is employing the same strategy in an attempt to defeat opposition incumbents in several other cities, such as Adana and Istanbul's Besiktas municipality.

-- Istanbul: Many consider the metropolitan mayorship of the 11.5 million-large megalopolis of Istanbul to be the third most important political job in the country, after President and Prime Minister. PM Erdogan served as Refah Party metropolitan municipality mayor from 1994-1997; AKP's Kadir Topbas has held the seat since 2004. CHP recently named its parliamentary deputy vice chair and recent corruption watch dog Kemal Kilicdaroglu (ref E) as its candidate. Most analysts do not believe Kilicdaroglu's strong anti-corruption platform is enough to defeat Topbas, who is widely expected

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to win re-election. AKP claims to be focusing on electoral gains in CHP municipal strongholds of Besiktas and Kadikoy; however, CHP won resounding majorities in both districts five years ago and even diehard AKP activists view wins in these districts as unlikely.

-- Izmir: Performing well in strongly secular Izmir is a pillar of AKP's strategy to improve on its tremendous success in July 2007 national elections. Although AKP is unlikely to pull off the extraordinary feat of ousting the incumbent CHP metropolitan mayor, it could well increase its sub-provincial mayoral seats and its presence on the sub-provincial and municipal councils by astutely targeting Izmir's growing conservative middle class voters and the poor voters who have swelled the city's outlying neighborhoods in recent years (ref F).

-- Eskisehir: This industrial city in western Anatolia is shaping up to be another close race between the successful and popular two-time incumbent Democratic Left Party candidate Yilmaz Buyukersen and the AKP's Hasan Gunel. In 2004, Buyukersen won a narrow race over his AKP opponent, 44 percent - 42 percent, a difference of only about 9,000 votes. In 2009, leftist CHP has nominated its own candidate after Buyukersen rebuffed CHP overtures to run on its ticket. CHP may draw enough votes from Buyukersen to allow AKP, which already controls Eskisehir's two sub-municipality mayorships,

to slip into the municipal mayor's office as well.

-- Diyarbakir: Diyarbakir's election is seen by many as a referendum on AKP's Kurdish policy, which has taken some steps to acknowledge Turkey's multicultural texture, but has also been unafraid to use harsh measures against the PKK and its sympathizers. AKP recently nominated one of its Diyarbakir MP Kutbettin Arzu. Selecting this benign but uncharismatic former head of the Diyarbakir Chamber of Commerce appears to be a tactic to draw in voters from business and competing Sunni religious groups. Although AKP has launched Kurdish-language broadcasting, and is actively distributing light bulbs, coal, and other freebies, Arzu does not have the big-name status AKP promised, and needs, to defeat incumbent DTP mayor Osman Baydemir, who vows to "hold the fortress" of Diyarbakir.

-- Adana: In a surprise move, Adana's four-term Mayor Aytac Durak defected from AKP to join MHP (ref G), a political shift some say will cost him the election, given the city's Kurdish and Arab populations' general aversion to MHP's nationalist ideology. AKP's mayoral candidate for Adana, Mehmet Ali Bilici, is a former ANAP parliamentarian whose integrity apparently makes up for his lack of charm and dynamism. Local media report Bilici is already working to cultivate the religious, conservative and business-sector vote. The race may come down to personality vs. party loyalty.

-- Other southeastern cities: Van's incumbent Mayor Burhan Yenigun has been tapped by AKP to run for another term in office. While DSP and CHP have named candidates, the real race in Van will be between DTP, which has yet to name a candidate, and Yenigun. In other cities, AKP has rather curiously neglected to give its incumbent mayors the nod, such as Osmaniye's Davut Cuhadar and Sanliurfa's Ahmet Fakibaba. While Cuhadar's present plans are unknown, Fakibaba has moved to join Saadet party in the midst of press reporting public rallies protesting AKP's decision not to nominate him.

-- Trabzon: AKP has set its sights on the Black Sea city of Trabzon currently help by CHP, and previously by the Islamist Saadet Party. Personality trumps party in Black Sea politics, however, and incumbent CHP mayor Canalioglu is a well-liked populist (Ankara 1828). It does not appear that AKP's recent nominee possesses enough popularity or charisma to win Trabzon.

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<http://www.intelink.sgov.gov/wiki/Portal:Turkey>

Jeffrey